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## **The Future of Higher Education: Review of Jon McGee's *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education***

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**Jon McGee, *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education* (2015),  
Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University Press, 192 pages, ISBN:  
9781421419209**

In his book, *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education*, Jon McGee (2015) provides a well-informed contextual palette of current and potential challenges to higher education. As the cost of attending college rises and prospective student demographics and perceptions change, McGee believes there is a need for adaptation. With the number of higher education institutions growing, McGee offers useful context of demographic, economic, and cultural changes in America to help higher education leaders better understand their institutional relationship within evolving society. McGee artfully describes these changes at length, addresses how these three changes impact the value of higher education, and how institutions and their leaders can better position themselves amidst a shifting environment.

He urges college institutions to understand how they are impacted by a changing country and construct appropriate and relevant solutions to address impending challenges. Exploration of disruption and opportunity within the shifting national landscape is portrayed through data and big trends in higher education. The author presents potential challenges throughout the book as a springboard for higher education administrators to craft solutions to their unique circumstances.

McGee offers perspective as both a higher education administrator and father to describe current challenges in higher education. As competition is fierce, colleges and universities must construct programs and attractions while managing costs (McGee, 2015). For the past two decades, higher education costs have risen and additional programs and amenities continue to push tuition and fees upward (Castiglia & Smith-Knopik, 2013). Meanwhile, public funding is cut and colleges are struggling to conform to changing demographic, economic, and cultural platforms (McGee, 2015).

### **Demographic Trends**

Reflecting and analyzing history leading up to the 2008 recession, McGee (2015) begins by discussing important demographic trends in our nation. McGee argues public

policy, higher education institutions, and families interact closely. Local and regional changes will also impact institutional growth, as high school graduates continue to decline in the Midwest and Northeast (McGee, 2015). McGee suggests recruitment will need to rely on geographic trends, as most students stay within a 500-mile radius from home. As students who enroll in higher education become more diverse, administrators will need to find ways to adapt and serve different needs (McGee, 2015). Along with a diverse enrollment, attrition and retention will become important for institutions to address, as the need to focus on students who have never enrolled continue to rise (McGee, 2015).

### **Economic Trends**

Economically, families across the income spectrum worry about the cost of a college education (McGee, 2015). The Great Recession of 2008 impacted all four of these, leaving American families poorer (McGee, 2015). As cost of attendance continues to increase, families of all socioeconomic classes are forced to adapt (Castiglia & Smith-Knopik, 2013). McGee suggests scarcity and uncertainty will be around for the foreseeable future, and will influence financial aid and budget practices and choices. Income, net worth, saving, and unemployment will be influential for the future of higher education (McGee, 2015).

McGee argues higher costs for a college education are not caused solely by a slow economic recovery. Students likely turn to loans because their families live beyond their means and fail to save their money, creating limited resources (McGee, 2015). Public perception of student loan debt has become more leery in recent years, and the author believes mainstream media is to blame. McGee describes more than ninety-five percent of students pay off their debt, and most students owe less than \$25,000 in loans (McGee, 2015). However, institutions will continue to contend with price sensitivity, financial need, and public perspective on the value of a college degree (McGee, 2015).

### **Cultural Trends**

Culture has introduced the similarities of higher education and consumer commodities (McGee, 2015). Price has become the most powerful market tool for standing out in the higher education marketplace (McGee, 2015). McGee argues that quality and experience are largely dependent on effective price tags. Rankings and the competitive desire for institutions to copy offerings make it difficult to understand the differences between institutions (McGee, 2015). To help students and their families better understand how institutions differ from one another, McGee believes institutions should selectively present information addressing aspects such as programs and amenities for students to understand what they do and do not do.

Ultimately in today's market, students and their families want to know if the sacrifice of paying for college will translate to a job (McGee, 2015). McGee (2015) believes attending college has increasingly become more of a commodity than for intellectual and personal development. This transactional nature is summed up with the phrase, "you go to college to get a job so you can have a life" (McGee, 2015, p. 75). This

notion of a commodity starkly contrasts the learning and developmental purpose of higher education found within general education and liberal arts classes. While some college students may value the choice in selecting a college or university based on factors such as location, prestige, and cost of attendance, the transactional nature encourages finding the fastest and cheapest route to gain the credentials (McGee, 2015). The author believes this unfortunate reality has existed among students and parents for quite some time, as many institutions believe an interdisciplinary education is best. The author's perspective as a father, who values the learning and developmental aspects of college, is valid and important to consider. McGee encourages institutions to consider the values, beyond economic, which should be important to instill in their graduates. "How do we help prospective students make choices that best suit their abilities and aspirations?" (McGee, 2015, p. 76). No doubt, students hold the answers to how best we should be serving them.

## **Discussion**

These demographic, economic, and cultural changes are out of direct institutional control (McGee, 2015). Students from lower socioeconomic classes are entering higher education at a higher rate, and the challenge of how to afford the rising cost of attending college persists (McGee, 2015). While it is comforting to know students still value the economic worth of a higher education, institutions will need large-scale investments in financial aid to adapt to the changing socioeconomic characteristics of the traditional-age college student (McGee, 2015). McGee (2015) believes educational leaders need to assess and develop their unique advantage in a crowded marketplace, and spend less time and resources on aspects that detract from an institutions' distinctiveness.

While McGee (2015) has focused on challenges facing public and private colleges and universities, it would have been interesting to expand upon the implications for two-year institutions such as community colleges. McGee's analysis could have expanded on implications for adult learners and non-traditional students. Additionally, recent political topics surrounding free tuition and eliminating student debt are not presented. Rather than simply focusing on context, it would have been more helpful if this book offered more suggestions, for political reform, colleges and universities, and families of prospective students.

"What is the market footprint of our distinction?" (McGee, 2015, p. 121). This quote sums up the future of higher education. Stability in a shifting market is a difficult task, but McGee (2015) believes "finding opportunity during disequilibrium" is the greater challenge (p. 142). McGee offers a plethora of experiences as a vice president of planning for the College of Saint Benedict and St. John's University, and defends the transformational power of attending college. However, he coincidentally views higher education with skepticism about the rising costs of attendance and student employment opportunities after graduation as a parent.

McGee's book is a must-read for college presidents, administrators, faculty, staff, students and families. His explanations demonstrate his concern regarding the shifting demographic, economic, and cultural forces that impact higher education. Thorough data is effectively used to support the author's stance. The author positions the reader to

determine value for their own institution, given its unique individual traits and qualities that separate it from others. According to McGee (2015), “organizations of all types approach decision making through the lens of a worldview and processes that guide their thinking, shape and reflect their values, and define their sense of self” (p.108). The book provides an excellent example of such a lens for readers to explore and answer their own questions pertaining to their unique setting.

## **References**

- Castiglia, B., & Smith-Knopik, M. (2013). Innovation in business education: Disrupting the status quo. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 13(3), 126-142.
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